
**THE ELECTION OF 2016 IN THE UNITED STATES:
DONALD TRUMP AND THE DECADENCE OF AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY**

**A ELEIÇÃO DE 2016 NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS:
DONALD TRUMP E A DECADÊNCIA DA DEMOCRACIA AMERICANA**

AUGUSTUS BONNER COCHRAN

Ph.D., University of North Carolina, Professor of Political Science
Agnes Scott College.

ABSTRACT

The election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump has taken everyone by surprise, including Trump himself. Commentators initially expected him to be merely a flash in the pan, attracting attention but not a sustainable, serious contender. When he became the forerunner in the Republican primaries, the conventional wisdom was that he would be handily defeated when the field narrowed to a manageable number, certainly when he faced a “regular” Republican.

KEYWORDS: Election of U.S.; Republican; Democratic.

RESUMO

A eleição do presidente dos Estados Unidos Donald J. Trump tomou a todos de surpresa, incluindo o próprio Trump. Os comentaristas inicialmente esperavam que ele fosse apenas um flash na panela, atraindo atenção, mas não um competidor sustentável e sério. Quando se tornou o precursor nas primárias republicanas, a sabedoria convencional era que ele seria derrotado quando o campo se reduzisse a um número manejável, certamente quando enfrentava um republicano "regular".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Eleição dos EUA; Republicano; Democrático.

INTRODUCTION

The election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump has taken everyone by surprise, including Trump himself. Commentators initially expected him to be merely a flash in the pan, attracting attention but not a sustainable, serious contender. When he became the forerunner in the Republican primaries, the conventional wisdom was that he would be handily defeated when the field narrowed to a manageable number, certainly when he faced a “regular” Republican. The reluctant consolidation of the Republican “Establishment” around the roundly disliked Senator Ted Cruz, however, failed to halt Trump’s momentum, and he garnered the nomination and tepid support of his party. Still, facing the experienced and highly competent, and battle hardened, Hillary Clinton, few thought the Trump campaign

could succeed, especially after tapes were released that showed him bragging about sexually assaulting women with impunity led many Republican leaders to withdraw their support and his poll numbers to dip dramatically. The race again tightened when the Federal Bureau of Investigation announced it was reopening its investigation into Clinton's emails and the blow to Clinton's campaign remained potent even when the FBI announced, mere days before the election, that it had found no evidence to justify continuing its investigation. Nonetheless, the race ended with polls showing Clinton comfortably ahead and most commentary centered on whether she could garner an overwhelming, perhaps historic, victory sufficient to break the logjam immobilizing U.S. politics for the last six years. The decisive victory for Trump in the Electoral College, although it is important to remember that he lost the popular vote by almost three million votes, befuddled most observersⁱ and has professionals questioning their methods.ⁱⁱ Trump's victory was not 2016's only unanticipated, almost inexplicable, oddity. The significant success of Senator Bernie Sanders's campaign was as much a surprise on the left as Trump on the right. When campaigning kicked off in 2015, most Americans had never heard of Sanders and were presumed unalterably hostile to any brand of socialism. The notion that Sanders, unaffiliated with any party, could attract more than a handful of votes in contested primaries against the unassailable Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's presumptive heir apparent, would have been dismissed as utopian speculation. Even Bernie entered the race with the intention not to win the nomination but to pull the debate to the left.ⁱⁱⁱ But Sanders' achievement goes well beyond changing the conversation because he has shown that left (perhaps not socialist, since the Senator's principle proposals have a more populist than socialist foundation, but they definitely fall outside the range of what has heretofore been considered viable planks in any imaginable political platform) ideas have traction.^{iv} Sanders polled over 12 million votes, 46% of the votes cast in the Democratic contests (more than Trump received in winning the Republican nomination), and won 22 states in an steeply

uphill primary contest against Clinton, who had the nomination all but locked up before the contest began.

CONTENDING EXPLANATIONS OF ELECTION 2016

With pundits still reeling from the shock of the election, a wide range of interpretations have emerged to explain the voting results. One way to grasp the vigorous debate about why Trump won is to construct a typology of explanations ranged along an ideological scale:

□ On the right, **conservatives** interpret Trump's triumph as victory for the people. The **populist** variant sees Trump was an anti-establishment rebel, representing the revolt of masses of "forgotten people" against elites of both parties, most especially toppling the detested Republican leadership. Ironically, that explanation squares with some liberal commentators; for example, Paul Krugman has argued that Republican leaders have been running a shell game since Ronald Reagan, appealing to their base on traditional socio/cultural issues but governing in favor of wealthy donors. Trump won because the base finally woke up, recognized the con game, and threw the grifters out.^v Meanwhile, the "**establishment**" in both parties and especially in the media have rallied around the conservative narrative that "the system worked." Reassuring Americans that the "peaceful transfer of power" is almost unique to this country and the main criteria for evaluating our democracy, these congratulatory conservatives resolutely overlook the anger and alienation apparent in the electorate as well as the extreme departure from normal governance on display during the transition period and first days of the new administration.

□ In the center, **liberal interpretations** reflect disappointment with the outcome, of course, and in addition, many liberals seem disappointed in American institutions or

voters. The **faulty institutions** interpretations maintain that Hillary would have won but for the malfunctioning of some critical institution. Most prominently in line for condemnation is the Electoral College, of course, since Hillary did in fact win, the election if referring to the popular vote, but lost the official election because the outcome is determined by this holdover from the 18th century, a horse-and-buggy vote counting mechanism still relied on in the age of television, cell phones, and computers. Another agency bitterly blamed by liberals is the FBI - either right-wing extremists within agency or its Republican director Comey. Either way, the announcements of investigations into Hillary's emails unarguably inflicted huge damage on her electoral chances and might have cost her the election. Liberals also perceive the contemporary Republican Party as having deviated from the traditional mainstream of American politics. Finally, resurrecting shades of the Cold War, many Democratic liberals are resuming their former roles as hardline anti-Communists and blaming Russian intelligence agencies for stealing the election. Some disillusioned liberals go even further, blaming the election results on **faulty voters**.^{vi} Hillary would have won except for the racist, sexist, chauvinist, at best ignorant voters, who voted for Trump, a complaint that often targets the white male working class. Though widespread, there are numerous pitfalls in explanations that judge white male workers as the chief culprit. Without denying that racism and intolerance are serious problems, it is not clear that such illiberal attitudes are uniquely strong in this group. Nor can it explain white male workers who voted for Obama deserted Hillary for Trump or why Hillary performed worse among women than Obama, or why Trump fared better with Latinos than Romney despite his provocative statements about Mexican immigrants. The biggest problem with this typically liberal methodological individualist interpretation is that even to extent is true, assuming that many voters are racist, sexist, etc., and that they voted their racism, sexism, etc., it understands those attitudes in individualistic, psychological terms and ignores questions about causation and consequences, about why these voters have these attitudes and what the implications are for politics.

□□ On the left (and there is not much left that commands public attention in U.S. politics), more **radical interpretations** point to economic issues that tend to get conveniently ignored by mainstream pundits, which endows their analysis with a deeper, more sweeping critique of “the system.” Some left explanations tend to **blame policies**, such as criticizing the strategic choices of the Democrats: the party picked the more conservative candidate, then she ran a campaign following a more conservative play book, attacking Trump as a deviant Republican (which did not help other Democrats running against regular Republicans) or stressing his personal disqualifications, despite the fact that her own personal negatives were greater than his, thus ignoring her own policy positions and the need to give people positive reasons to vote for her. More fundamentally, however, leftist critics blame the Democratic Party as far back as Jimmy Carter for abandoning the New Deal and adopting neoliberalism. They note that many of the policies that have wreaked havoc on ordinary Americans, including many of Trump’s “forgotten people,” were initiated under Bill Clinton - NAFTA, sandbagging the social safety net, mass incarceration, financial deregulation - that led to disaster under Bush, and eight years of the Obama administration achieved only slow and partial success in undoing the damage. So the Democrats as well as the Republicans bear some responsibility for the sad economic straits of much of the American public and their consequent anger at the status quo expressed at the polls.^{vii}

Some leftist interpretations focus on deeper **critique of political economy**, arguing that neoliberalism has corrupted the North American “system.” Unions, for example, have been devastated in the neoliberal era. White working class males, if unionized, vote Democratic, but union membership has fallen from nearly one-third to just 6% of the private workforce in the last four decades. Now the main organizations mobilizing the working class is evangelical churches, the principal pillar of Republican power. Campaign finance law has been undermined by *Citizens United* and other court cases reflecting neoliberal jurisprudence.^{viii} Media as well as more formal institutions of formal education for informing citizens, university as well as primary

and secondary education, have all succumbed to neoliberal hegemony. Globalization has aided corporations in exporting American manufacturing production and jobs abroad and redistributing income up to the top 1 percent of the 1 percent, while being rationalized as a natural force beyond human control by the corporate media.^{ix} So analysis on the left blame the neoliberal right turn in American politics, initiated by Ronald Reagan almost four decades ago, that moved the Democrats as well as the Republicans to the right of the political spectrum. Since Hillary, like Barack Obama and her husband Bill, were all implicated in this neoliberal hegemony,^x many voters turned to Trump, who at least symbolized change, led by an “outsider” to established, status quo politics and who offered some promise of breaking up the system.

None of the interpretations is entirely false. On the contrary, all contain elements of valid explanation. This article, however focuses on a different set of factors that are important in understanding the election of 2016 that led to the presidency of Donald Trump, namely that Trump’s victory represents in the most vivid imagery imaginable the decay of democratic political institutions in the United States. One way to appreciate what such an alternative explanation can add to our understanding is to note that many of the explanations surveyed thus far rest on two highly problematic assumptions.

MANDATES AND PUBLIC OPINION

First, many commentators view elections as the voice of the people, the occasion when the electorate is able to tell its leaders how it wishes to be governed. On this assumption, elections give leaders mandates to govern and set the direction for the country. Votes, however, are literally silent actions, and they must be “translated,” that is, interpreted, to derive a message. But can we know why people voted, what message they intended their vote to send? Every candidate takes a

stand on many issues, but voters have only a single ballot to cast. Which position won Trump voters' support - the tough stance on immigration? the rejection of free trade? the promise to support Social Security and Medicare? the critique of Obamacare? the more isolationist foreign problem? Etc. With Trump, divining his appeal to supporters is particularly difficult because in a real sense Trump did not have policies or stances, but rather issued enigmatic and constantly shifting statements daily. Some pundits even think that rather than any policy appeal, this mercurial style, combining tough sounding, "politically incorrect" rhetoric with totally inconsistent positions, was exactly the key to his winning votes.

Votes may be silent, but we can survey people to disclose their reasons for voting, but it is not easy to perceive much coherence or consistency in voter opinions, and their priorities and the intensity of various opinions may vary widely. It can be erroneous to assume that issues salient to the campaign necessarily resonated with the candidate's voters. Even an issue as emblematic for the Trump campaign as "build the wall" actually failed to gain majority support from Trump voters, and Trump voters actually rank jobs much higher in importance than immigration. Further undermining the usefulness of polling data to explain election results, polls measure only verbal responses to questions asked. If the poll fails to ask perceptive questions, or if respondents do not give honest answers, or if respondents do not themselves know the real reasons for their own votes, that is, do not "know their own minds," the meaning of their votes remains undiscovered. All of these are real limitations. For example, much racism in the U.S. nowadays is not overt, but subconscious, unbeknown to racists themselves, and even overt, self-conscious racists are often too embarrassed to express explicitly racist attitudes.

Although professional pundits and the corporate media perpetually need to view elections as giving new presidents a mandate to govern, classic American political science studies of public opinion severely undermine the validity of this enterprise of trying to read messages in tea leaves of elections. In the first place, Americans are notably non-ideological. Phillip Converse maintained as long ago as

the 1960s that the public's beliefs lacked internal consistency, and only a tiny handful of survey respondents could be rated as having a set of views sufficiently coherent to be labeled a political ideology.^{xi}

In a 1966 book, Free and Cantril added a twist to this view of public opinion by arguing that Americans were oddly consistent in their inconsistency! On issues pitched in abstract, ideological terms, Free and Cantril found that Americans were notably conservative. For example, the public overwhelmingly supported broad generalized statements advocating smaller government, lower taxes, or fewer regulations. At the same time, public sentiment solidly backed government programs that can only be considered liberal: more spending for schools, stronger regulations for public protection, more active measures to combat poverty and enhance opportunity. Americans are, Free and Cantril concluded, ideological conservatives but operational (i.e., practical) liberals.^{xii} These old findings seem to hold water over time. In a parallel study done in by Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs, this striking ideological inconsistency, one could almost label it political schizophrenia, persists.^{xiii}

Another complicating factor, one that might mitigate the view of ideological inconsistency, is populism. One might even contend that many Americans do have a fairly consistent view of politics, but that these views are populist rather than liberal or conservative. Populism, instead of falling on a neat left-right spectrum, views politics as a conflict between “the people” and “the elite.” Authors such as John Judis, however, maintain that populism, however, is less a coherent ideology than a mood or stance, and complicates the analysis by arguing that populism itself can be divided into left and right variants, with left-wing populism pitting the bottom and middle classes against the elite, but with right-wing populists complicating this picture by accusing the elite of coddling a third group, often ending up scapegoating a weak minority group instead of attacking the nominal target of their ire, the elite.^{xiv} The existence of populist attitudes among a large swath of the public, with as many as half of Americans adhering to populist sentiments, can muddle the interpretation of

elections because it often goes unrecognized by the majority of academic researchers and commentators on public opinion who interpret all of politics on a liberal-conservative continuum.

One recent theory of American public opinion developed by Alan Abramowitz and Stephen Webster is the theory of negative partisanship. In the past, researchers following in the footsteps of the Michigan voting studies^{xv} identified partisan identification as the primary explanation of voter choice -American voters' decisions were influenced by their views on candidates and issues, but even these were filtered through their loyalties to party. Partisan identification was the single strongest factor in vote choice.^{xvi} What Abramowitz and Weber discovered, however, is that nowadays many Americans' partisanship is more negative than positive. Using a "feelings thermometer," they found that Americans are less attached to a party by warm feelings of loyalty that repelled by the other party by negative emotional valences.^{xvii} This negative partisanship helps explain why increasing numbers of people tell pollsters that they are voting against rather than for candidates. If Trump voters were mainly voting against Hillary, does that mean that his main mandate is simply don't be Hillary? But then even more, almost three million more, people voted against Trump - so the mandate of 2016 is that the President should not be Hillary, but also not be Trump!

This lack of mandate is reinforced by non-voting. About 42% of the eligible voting age population did not vote at all. What were the abstainers trying to say with their silence? Abstention is even harder to read than the act of voting. Realizing that Trump and Clinton split the 58% of the eligible votes actually cast reduces Hillary's share to approximately 30% of the eligible population, about 28% voting for Trump, and about 42% (non)"voting" for none-of-the-above. Perhaps the main message being sent by about three-quarters of the American public to its new president is "we don't want you."

DEMOCRATIC DECAY

That rather startling conclusion highlights a second, even more deeply rooted assumption underlying much election commentary, namely, the firmly ingrained presumption that U.S. is a democracy. To a great degree this reflects a widely accepted belief that democracy means a political system with elections.^{xviii} Even more superficial than this thin definition of democracy as elections, there is the mentally lazy American predisposition to equate democracy with American institutions. This tendency can be observed in post-WWII American political science, whose equation of American polyarchy with democracy was dubbed revisionist democratic theory precisely because rather than employing a definition based on ideal concepts of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, liberty, and equality, it revised the definition of democracy by deriving it from existing American practices. Media commentary and conventional wisdom follow a similar path: democracy simply means “the way we do things in the U.S.” For example, separation of powers must be democratic because it is a key principle of American constitutionalism, even though it inhibits popular sovereignty and exacerbates inequality.^{xix} This sloppy thinking shades easily, especially in the media and on the right, into shallow celebrations of the status quo, inertial resistance to reform, e.g., of the Electoral College, and chauvinist paeans to America as “the world’s greatest democracy,” despite comparative research that rates American institutions as only a middling democracy.^{xx}

Instead of trying to interpret the intentions of voters in the 2016 election, this article focuses on American political institutions. Its thesis is that Trump does not represent a bout of temporary insanity or a dark stain on the American psyche but is rather a symptom of the decadence of our political institutions. Our pluralist democratic politics, a combination of liberal politics and dynamic capitalism, that reached its zenith in the flourishing in the post-WWII era, has been struggling since the 1970s, both politically and economically. What the 2008 economic crisis

highlighted about changes to the American economy, the bankruptcy of financialized capitalism, has now been matched in the political realm by Trump's taking the stage in the 2016 elections: the bankruptcy of a political system that functioned reasonably well for an exceptional epoch in US history but now seems outmoded and incapable of addressing the pressing problems facing the nation. American political institutions, always only thinly democratic when measured against democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, liberty, and equality, now stand revealed as in a sad state of decay. As Al Smith advocated, however, the best cure for the failings of democracy is more democracy.^{xxi}

“ROTTEN BOROUGHs”: UNREPRESENTATIVENESS IN THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE, THE U.S. SENATE, AND GERRYMANDERED DISTRICTS

The most obvious failed institution from a democratic perspective is the Electoral College. For the second time in this century (the first being the 2000 election of George W. Bush despite a half million receiving fewer actual votes than Al Gore), the Electoral College has produced a winner at odds with the popular vote for president (Hillary Clinton won almost three million more votes than Trump). If its democratic pedigree was questionable at its origin,^{xxii} the *raison d'être* of the EC as a vote counting mechanism is highly dubious today, when mechanized voting and computers could produce a much more accurate tally. The misrepresentation stems from two mechanisms. First, electoral votes are allocated on the basis of each state's representation in Congress. The number of representatives in the House roughly reflects population, but each state has two Senators, regardless of population. This basis over-represents less populous states. Second, all but two (Maine and Nebraska) states cast their votes according to the “unit rule” - all electors vote for the winner of a plurality of popular votes in their state, meaning that the division of electoral votes can deviate from the split in popular votes if vote margins

are uneven across states. Usually the winning margin of the top vote-getter is exaggerated in the Electoral College, arguably conferring additional legitimacy on the winner, but the election of candidates with only a minority of votes has happened five times. More serious potential for breakdown lies if no candidate receives an absolute majority of electoral votes. The election of president then evolves on the House of Representatives, where the constitutional workings of the system become murky. No such extraordinary event has occurred since the 19th century, but the potential for chaos and confusion lurks in the background.

Some defenders of the Electoral College maintain that despite formally over-representing small, rural states, the actual political bias of the system favors large, urban states, at least if they are competitive. Candidates favor “battleground states,” with significant numbers of electoral votes in play, with time, resources, and attention especially since the winner take all unit rule exaggerates the impact of these large, competitive states’ votes. Most other arguments for the Electoral College either are patently false, circular, or shade into mysticism. The real reasons for its continual existence, despite its frequent and potentially disastrous malfunctioning, are inertia - it is almost impossible to amend the Constitution, and the bias to two partyism built into the system.^{xxiii}

Recently the Senate has been the target of sharp criticism for its unrepresentativeness. With each state having two Senators, regardless of population, a coalition of approximately 25 small states with a minority of the national population could conceivably its policy preferences on the rest of the nation. More plausibly, especially given the Senate filibuster rules,^{xxiv} Senators from a very small number of states, e.g., 12, with a tiny portion of the U.S. population, perhaps as low as 20%, can effectively hold legislation hostage, threatening to block it entirely and at least shaping it to the minority will.^{xxv} Arguably this happened to President Obama’s health care reform, where a few strategically situated Senators (with their power augmented even further by holding committee chairships based on seniority) from small, rural states reshaped key provisions in more conservative ways.^{xxvi}

Gerrymandering, the process of drawing district lines to favor the election of incumbents or representatives of a particular party, is an old American practice, but with the advent of sophisticated election data and computers to aid analysis, partisan district design is moving from an art to a science. Consequently, few districts in the U.S. House (or in state legislatures) are truly competitive. The rate of incumbency, despite political leaders' constant pandering to electoral considerations, is astronomical; in recent decades, more than 90% of Representatives who choose to stand for re-election return to Congress. Depending on different definition of competitiveness (for example, districts that divide their vote more evenly than 60 to 40%, or elections won by less than 10%), estimates argue that fewer than 15% of elections for the House are competitive, or assert that only about 35 House seats are actually at stake in a national election for 435 House seats. When the vast bulk of seats are "safe," it is difficult to claim that elections register public opinion, and a change of national policy direction faces strong barriers in the form of an entrenched, partisan bias. ^{xxvii}

GRIDLOCK

To understand frustration that produced an electoral victory for Donald Trump (as well as the astounding success of Bernie Sanders in Democratic primaries) one must grasp is the extraordinary stalemate that has gripped American politics in recent years. Various diagnoses locate the fault in different places, ranging from the decline of "comity" in Congress to a loss of civility among the public, with various factors bearing the blame. The most prominent diagnosis of American political deadlock lately comes from Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, two Washington-based, very mainstream political scientists whose views are so noteworthy precisely because of their conservatism - their views have long epitomized the "inside the beltway Washington Establishment" thinking. Both have long careers working for elite, even

ideologically conservative, organizations and defending American political institutions and the pluralist democratic model as the most realistic approximation of the democratic ideal possible. Today, however, they have reached the opposite conclusion, embodied in the titles of their book: It's Even Worse than It Looks (and let's face it, most observers think it looks pretty bad!), now revised with a title that reflects an even more dire assessment, It's Even Worse than It Was.^{xxviii} These two pillars of the "Establishment" argue that the U.S. political system is dysfunctional because of a mismatch of constitutional structure and contemporary American political parties. The constitutional system, based principally on various checks and balances, requires consensus, cooperation, and compromise to work, but our current parties are more like the ideological parties of parliamentary systems than the old presidential coalition parties. These non-ideological "big tent" parties were mainly vote-seeking vehicles that sought broad support to win elections and welcomed all regardless of agreement on policy. Once in office, these electoral machines turned into pragmatic governing coalitions producing moderate, often bipartisan legislation in order to gain support for re-election. Nowadays, however, parties have been transformed into a more parliamentary mold: they run on ideologically extreme platforms, appealing to relatively narrow electoral bases, and in office, adhere to rigid platforms seeking to maintain ideological purity, resulting in polarization and "permanent campaigns" rather than post-election pragmatic governing.

What has garnered unusual media attention for this academic book is the (conservative) authors' claim that the polarization is asymmetrical, mostly the fault of the Republicans who have become much more extreme than the more moderate Democrats. Although the media blame both parties equally for the rigidity and the gridlock plaguing Washington, Mann and Ornstein label this "false balance," a misplaced attempt to maintain the media's posture of fairness in the public eye as well as its professional norm of objectivity defined as presenting both sides (sic) of issues.

The asymmetrical parties thesis seems to reflect political realities rather than merely biases of (conservative!) observers. Grossman and Hopkins argue that the two major parties are different kinds of political animals. The Republicans, they find, are a much more ideological party. Democrats, on the other hand, are a groups-benefits type of electoral machine. In other words, the Democrats have made a much less radical transformation from the old-style big tent parties in which politicians sought broad popular support not on the basis of ideologically consistent platforms but by providing pragmatic benefits (“bringing home the bacon”) to their base constituencies.^{xxix} Moreover, this asymmetrical party thesis comports with the campaign strategies of the two parties. Faced with a public opinion bifurcated between ideological conservatism and pragmatic liberalism, as Free and Cantril described, Republicans run on abstract ideology, explains why their campaign speeches so often string together empty clichés. Democrats, on the other hand, win by proposing pragmatic policies to solve concrete problems, explaining why Democratic leaders’ speeches often are laundry lists of ideas devised by policy wonks, certainly more workable as public policy, but often uninspiring as political rhetoric.

Paul Krugman contends that the dramatic success of Trump’s challenge to the Republican Establishment as opposed to the relative success of the Democratic Party Establishment in withstanding the Sanders challenge reflects this party difference. Republican leaders, he asserts, have provided little real benefits to their loyal voters in recent decades, opening space for Trump to triumph by offering a real “win” as opposed to vacuous ideological clichés to his followers. On the Democratic side, in contrast, base constituencies stayed loyal to the Establishment candidate, with minorities and women overwhelmingly sticking with Hillary despite Sanders’ vigorous denunciation of the status quo, because Democratic leaders have in fact pushed policies that resulted in real, if not dramatic, gains for these loyal Democratic groups.^{xxx}

POLITICAL PARTIES IN DECAY

The US has had, almost from its origins (the constitution was ratified in 1787, but parties did not develop until the second administration of President George Washington), a two-party system. Political scientists and historians often divide American electoral history into various (six or seven – the topic is controversial) different periods or party systems. The different partisan eras, each lasting roughly a political generation or about 40 or 50 years, are normally characterized by a stable majority party and a smaller, but still significant, minority party. The majority party usually dominates most presidential elections, a majority of seats in Congress, and a majority of state and local governments, although it is not unusual to have some regions controlled by the majority. The minority is not without hopes of winning elections, usually winning a couple of presidencies, especially when it recruits unusually appealing candidates or when the majority suffers from problems dealing with important issues. Periodic realigning or critical elections are seen as creating electoral earthquakes that shift the ground between majority and minority parties, producing new majorities (or new alliances of groups within and between the two parties).

The clearest example of a realignment occurred in reaction to the Great Depression. The Republicans, who had been the majority party since the Civil War with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, were perceived as insufficiently energetic in combating the economic crisis under President Herbert Hoover. In 1932, Democrat Franklin Roosevelt was elected President, and after enacting a package of restorative measures labeled the New Deal, was re-elected in a landslide with overwhelming Democratic majorities in the Congress as well. The New Deal Democratic coalition was a hodgepodge: labor, urban machines, ideological liberals, minorities, Catholics, and most problematically, the white South. Not for nothing beloved comic Will Rogers famously said, “I belong to no organized political party. I’m a Democrat.” Republicans came to represent those social forces opposed to the

liberal government activism of the New Deal, mainly business, the North and MidWest, the middle class, whites, and Protestants, but especially after WWII, with a social pact between labor and business, prosperity reigned in a system of mass production and mass production dubbed Fordism, and Democratic majorities stabilized.

With the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s, the Democratic coalition, always in tension, came unglued, as the national Democratic party, dependent on black votes in the North, led in legislating against the Jim Crow segregation of the South. Southern white voters flirted first with Goldwater, then migrated temporarily to third party challenge of Wallace, then entered the Republican party on the heels of Nixon's Southern Strategy. Republicans appealed not only to Southern whites but also to the Northern working class, especially urban ethnic groups feeling status threat from the centrality of blacks as an emerging new Democratic constituency. But status, ethnicity, and racism were not the only factors at work. LBJ's War on Poverty emphasized means-tested programs targeted for minorities and the poor as opposed to the New Deal's universal safety net programs that included the middle and working classes, and some policies seemed to directly challenge the bases of working class prosperity. For example, anti-poverty programs mobilized marginalized minorities to unseat the ethnic-based urban machines that had provided social progress for immigrants. Affirmative action policies pitted liberals and civil rights groups, anxious to aid social mobility for minorities, against unions; many white workers felt excluded from the special preferences granted to blacks. A politics of ethnic division displaced politics based on class solidarity.^{xxxi}

As social issues became more prominent than economic issues, Republicans increasingly succeeded in framing not just integration and racial issues in the South but national issues as matters of law and order, preservation of traditional or family values, respect for morality and human life. Many political scientists felt that the realignment due at the end of the 1960s, after a generation of Democratic dominance, was occurring with Nixon's landslide re-election in 1972. Watergate

intervened, however, retarding Republican gains, which seeped down gradually from the national to local offices, prompting some to speak of a split level realignment.^{xxxii} Only when the rise of Religious Right brought evangelicals into conservative political movement, who cemented an alliance with Republican Party under Reagan, did the realignment seem realized and Republican hegemony seem sealed.

The new Republican party, with its expanded base, like the New Deal Democrats before them, was composed of groups that made for strange bedfellows. The business class, variously labeled country club or Wall Street Republicans ("the Establishment") traditionally provided Republicanism with its electoral foundations and retained its predominant position within the party. On the other hand, the Religious Right ("Evangelicals") became numerically more important, providing most of the votes for Republican candidates; these lower middle or working class voters were often referred to as Main Street Republicans or simply as "the base." Republican leaders have been drawn mainly from the Establishment, but the most successful Republican politicians, for example, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, have but able to cobble together all the diverse groups within the party. Candidates seen as representing only one faction have had less success, e.g., George H. W. Bush and Mitt Romney,

Many observers have noted that Trump is a master salesperson; in fact, one major criticism is exactly that he is a charlatan, a master of illusions. Paul Krugman, however, points out that the leadership of the Republican Party has been running a shell game for years.^{xxxiii} Its candidates have emphasized cultural and social issues - anti-abortion, advocacy of school prayer and public displays of (Christian) religion, opposition to gay marriage - when convenient to motivate the base and turn out religious conservative voter. Once in office, however, these successful politicians have rarely fulfilled their promises (sometimes because they required constitutional revision, but little political capital to effect changes). The focus of Republicans when governing was always pro-business policies, tangible benefits for the Wall Street wing of party. But these policies, such as free trade deals, tax policies encouraging

the offshoring of jobs or deindustrialization, favorable tax rates for the wealthy, etc., are of little benefit to the base, and actually work against the interests of most Republican voters.

In What's The Matter With Kansas, Thomas Frank provocatively proposed that social issues were blinding middle and working class Americans to their economic interests, enabling the Republicans to woo especially religious right voters based on their social and cultural conservatism even though GOP policies hurt these voters' pocketbooks.^{xxxiv} If Democrats have famously "run left and governed right," the Republicans played the opposite game; they ran as populists, but governed as elitists.

Ironically, this ruse may be true not only of economic policy of also hold true for the issue that seems to most animate Trump supporters, migration. The liberal trade pacts Trump castigates are products of bipartisan support, and while Trump promises to restore American's country to them by building a wall against illegal immigration and blames the Obama administration for failing to stop the flow of illegal immigrants, NAFTA, championed by Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia) as Speaker of the House in coalition with President Bill Clinton, may bear much responsibility for stimulating massive immigration from Mexico. NAFTA knocked down barriers to cheap corn from MidWest, where industrialized agriculture dependent on large farms, mechanized production, genetically modified seeds, and petro-fertilizers, all undergirded by government subsidies to agri-business, yielded massive amounts of cheap corn that flooded Mexican market. Small Mexican farmers, unable to compete with this tide of corporatized corn, lost their farms and were driven off their land - and north to the U.S.^{xxxv} U.S. foreign policies, such as anti-Communist intervention in Southeast Asia and Central American, and now the War on Terror championed by the Republican Party, blindly championed by Republican leaders, have contributed to the waves of immigration that the Trump constituency so resents.

If Trump represents a rebellion in the Republican ranks by previously sleeping masses now awakened by rage against not merely Democratic policies but also

economic and foreign policies of their own party, some Democrats are also feeling used by their party elites, a discontent that burst to the surface with the Sanders campaign. Although President Obama remains popular within the party, the progressive wing registered its disenchantment with the lack of change promised by the Democratic standard-bearer in 2008 and again in 2012. Certainly the Republicans received the bulk of the blame; their Senate leader Mitch McConnell set Republican strategy by pledging from day one to defeat the new president by blocking every initiative that he proposed. Progressive Democrats, however, could not judge their party leaders entirely innocent. The party, at least since the New Democrats assumed leadership under Bill Clinton in the 1990s, had been under sway of Reagan's neoliberal hegemony. For example, Clinton had pushed NAFTA and other free trade treaties, and Obama himself was the chief advocate of the TransPacific Partnership. Bill Clinton had pronounced that "The era of big government is over," and even acknowledged that "We're all Eisenhower Republicans here."^{xxxvi} Obama had followed Bush's lead in carrying out the post-2008 bank bailout, perhaps a necessary evil to save the financial system, but it was unaccompanied by comparable policies to bail out foreclosed homeowners, distressed consumers, or the unemployed.^{xxxvii} After the Republican swing in the 2010 elections, he had also pursued an even more bipartisan path, prioritizing austerity in budget deals and reigning in entitlements in hopes of a budget-balancing deal with conservatives.

The middle classes, especially the working class, are suffering from this neglect; in fact, as talk of the dying or disappearing middle class became more common, startling new research revealed that the working class is literally dying. Unlike the trends for all other major social groups, death rates for white working class members were increasing. Many of the additional deaths could be attributed to alcohol, drugs, and suicide - causes that were said to reflect an "epidemic of despair" among white middle and lower income workers who felt neglected and abandoned to despair.^{xxxviii}

Thomas Frank, who in What's The Matter with Kansas had earlier blasted Republicans for defrauding working class voters by appealing to their social conservatism and evangelical religiosity while neglecting their economic interests, now wrote Listen Liberal (one wag suggested that it would be better subtitled What's the Matter with Massachusetts) lambasting the Democrats for making themselves over as the party of the professional classes while ignoring the needs of the working class, a traditional pillar of the New Deal coalition.^{xxxix} The neoliberal policies have been hard on the entire working class, of course, but white workers may be particularly alienated from the Democrats. Liberals have been diligent in recent decades of advocating diversity (often perceived by dominant groups such as whites, males, and heterosexuals as meaning advocacy for traditionally underrepresented groups but as neglecting, or even condemning, them) and opposed discrimination, but such laudable stances can often foster identity politics and at best address discrimination while neglecting inequality per se.^{xl}

The reasons for the American two party system are legion. Besides the inertia of tradition, there is the strength of party loyalty. There is also the force of self-fulfilling prophesy: money, media attention, momentum all flow to parties perceived to have a chance of winning. Most important, the “wasted vote syndrome” deters voters from casting ballots for third party candidates who seem to have no chance of winning, especially since in essence this decision represents a vote for one’s least favored candidate by depriving one’s second choice of support. U.S. electoral laws, inherited from Britain, enforce this wasted vote syndrome. By electing only one representative from each district (and the presidential electors are elected as a single unit from each state) based on a winner-take-all formula, single-member plurality vote counting systems push diverse groups of voters into just two formal parties, as opposed to alternative voter systems, such as proportional representation, used in most countries.^{xli}

Notice that historically there has always been two parties but not same two parties. In fact, the Republican Party was founded as a third party in the 1840s, but

displaced one of the then major parties, the Whigs, before the Civil War. While creating a sustainable and significant third party challenger is unrealistic as viable long run option, it is not unimaginable that a new party might successfully out-compete one of the current two major parties and take its place in what could remain a two-party system. Before the 2016 elections, the Republican Party seemed the more vulnerable to challenge from either a moderate centrist newcomer (for example, there was speculation that ex-NY Mayor Michael Bloomberg might run as an independent) or from a dissident group representing a disgruntled Republican base had Trump been denied the nomination. With the Democrats in disarray after the election, it is not unthinkable that the party could split into rival factions based on the Clinton and Sanders campaigns from the spring 2016 primaries, with only one winning the contest to be one of the two major parties. Although these scenarios of a major party falling victim to a third party challenger, the more likely prospect is the more historically normal pattern of political contestation being contained within the confines of the Republican and Democratic Parties. As a footnote, however, it is notable that the theory of negative partisanship propounded by Abramowitz and Webster, which finds that voting is based increasingly on growing repulsion toward the opposing party, does seem to open some space for a third party to emerge and displace either of two parties whose voter support is based less on positive attraction than on distaste for alternative. At the least, it indicates potential for rebellions within each party.

INTEREST GROUPS

While most media commentators and the public assume that elections determine public policy because the U.S. is a democracy, recent studies have called this electoral politics model into question. The discovery that shook this model to the core was Thomas Piketty's work on inequality: not just the type of inequality that is arguably hollowing out the middle class in the U.S., leading to a growing gulf between the poor and working poor versus the affluent, but a more extreme form of

inequality in which the top 1%, in fact a tiny percentage of the top 1%, are increasing their vast wealth at the expense of the 99%.^{xiii} Political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have argued persuasively that this kind of super-inequality cannot be explained by economic factors such as globalization or digitalization alone, but rather result from changed policies such as taxes, financial deregulation, corporate governance/CEO pay, and industrial relations. They maintain that election results do not explain these policies that so dramatically redistributed income and wealth upwards since 1980; it is implausible that voters would have chosen policies that favored the 1% at their expense, besides which these trends have occurred under both Democratic and Republican administrations. Hacker and Pierson instead propose that to understand such trends we need to conceive of politics as “organized combat” between various conflicting interests.

Their explanation then involves a historical account of group politics in recent decades. They contend that the 1960s saw the mobilization of many social movements seeking reforms, all of which cost business money and reduced profits. In the early 1970s, Lewis Powell (later to serve on the Supreme Court) wrote a now-famous memo to the Chamber of Commerce advocating that business undertake a campaign to combat its flagging position in society. These steps amounted to a counter-attack to defend business interest waged notably at the level of ideas, intended to reestablish capitalist hegemony (through the establishment of university chairs, think tanks, funded research, and friendly media – an idea that eventually led to the founding of Fox News. Business also bolstered its lobbying efforts, opening offices in Washington, undertaking public relations campaigns on public issues, and donating massive amounts to candidates. Simultaneously, organizations representing the poor and middle classes entered a decline. Unions faced a hostile atmosphere and hemorrhaged members. Other liberal groups continued to be active in the “organized combat” of pluralist politics, but their focus subtly shifted more to issues of representation and identity and away from economic matters. As Hacker and Pierson describe the result, “Mass-membership organizations representing the

economic interests of voter from the middle to the bottom of the economic ladder, always weak, have atrophied further, while the capacity of employers, other business-linked interests, and the affluent in general has greatly increased.” The redistribution of income and wealth, in other words, followed this redistribution of political power among the organized interest groups in American society.^{xliii}

MONEY, MEDIA, AND MANAGEMENT: A 3M POLITICS

W. Lance Bennett has argued that the trends in American electoral politics reflect the growing influence of money, media, and management. In other words, the traditional means of mobilizing voters depended on party organizations, and to some extent on various civil society organizations such as clubs, unions, and churches, to influence public opinion on issues and elections as well as to motivate, and even physically transport, voters to the polls. It was a labor intense operation, putting a premium on organized number of people. Bennett argues that these “people” organizations have been losing ground to the influence of campaign donations, mass media, especially television, and professionalized campaign management by political consultants. He notes that all are capital intensive, and thus that these shifts in campaigning style amount to a redistribution upward to those with, or with access to, financial resources. He also notes that this type of electoral politics facilitates campaigns that tend to be strong on image, even fluff and illusion, rather than substance. Thus he claims that the work of actual governance is increasingly severed from election, perhaps explaining the sense of frustration that many Americans feel that their government, though elected by them, is unresponsive to their needs and demands.^{xliv}

The rise of big money’s influence in American politics has attracted the most attention and criticism. Especially after the *Citizens United* decision opened the way to unlimited campaign spending by corporations, observers have decried the “financialization of politics.” The sheer growth in the amount of money contributed by

the affluent to campaigns can only be described as obscene. Whereas in 1980 the riches 0.01% of the population gave 10% of campaign money, today they supply 40%. The most affluent 10% supply 83% of money donated to campaigns.^{xlv} In other words, political candidates are dependent on funds to mount campaigns on a narrow sliver of the population, the very richest. Charles and David Koch, who inherited their father's oil business, have drawn the most attention.^{xlvi} It was widely reported that the Koch Brothers and their wealth friends were amassing a campaign chest of almost \$900 million to influence the 2016 election, and amount equal to what each of the two major parties was hoping to spend in the election – a development that prompted some observers to claim that the U.S. had at last become a three-party system, consisting of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the Billionaires Party! This financialization of politics is undermining public faith in American government: in 1964, 29% of Americans believed their government favored moneyed interests, but today that suspicion is credited by 80% of the public.^{xlvii}

Mass media also loom large in explaining elections in contemporary America. Donald Trump is not our first media star leader; Ronald Reagan was a Hollywood actor. But Trump is the first reality TV star to assume high political office, and some argue that the style of his presidency, at least in its initial stages, reflects nothing so much as the brusque and somewhat chaotic atmosphere of his show, "The Apprentice." In fact, it may not be too farfetched that Trump's ascendancy represents the coming to fruition of the thesis of Neal Gabler, whose Life: The Movie argued that life was imitating art and that politics (as were other facets of American life, including our own individual biographies) was becoming more and more like a movie.^{xlviii} Certainly the focus of politics increasingly resembles the chief content of mass media: entertainment.

To a great degree this trend simply reflects the ownership of the media; about six corporate conglomerates own the bulk of media ranging from television to radio to movies to publishing. Certainly the rise of social media has decentralized and democratized communications – we witness this phenomenon in the documentation

of police brutality in videos filmed on cell phones, leading to the Black Lives Matter movement. But social media giants Google, Facebook, as well as Google and Microsoft are also profit seeding, and incredibly profitable, corporations. Corporate news organizations tend to cover what sells, e.g., celebrities. Jay Leno once noted that politics was show business for ugly people, but the “beautiful people” play an increasingly prominent role in today’s politics.

Scandals also sell newspapers, and so coverage of scandals occupies a central place in political reporting. One especially eye-opening study contrasted American’s knowledge of Bill Clinton’s sex scandals compared to their knowledge of his policies. The startling finding was that Americans were exceedingly well informed about detailed aspects of the Lewinsky affair, with about two-thirds of the public able to answer over 80% of specific questions about the scandal, but they were uninformed about most of Clinton’s key policy positions, with only about 20% of respondents able to correctly identify his stance on even half the queries about policies. Not only were the people questioned uninformed, but they were misinformed. They tended to correctly identify Clinton’s policies when they conformed to his liberal image, but they misperceived his stances when he was more conservative. The researches attributed this result to the media’s reliance on simplistic labeling (there are virtually not terms used besides liberal or conservative in American political reporting) and the use of a game frame for stories – since Clinton’s Republican “opponents” were described as conservative, respondents deduced that Clinton’s “team” had to be liberal.^{xlix}

Use of a game (or strategic) frame to narrate news also embodies an approach that seeks to attract and entertain rather than inform. Elections are framed as horse races, with most reportage focusing on who is ahead. Even the governing process is portrayed as a simple struggle for power and scoring points rather than a serious attempt to set policies and directions. Treating audiences as spectators keeps them focused on which political forces are winning, but deprives them of information useful to them as citizens about which leaders and programs to back,

contributing to passivity. Arguably, the game frame also contributes to cynicism about politics, which reinforces apathy and non-involvement, because it perpetuates a picture of politics as a struggle for power for the selfish ends of winning.ⁱ

Another poisonous effect of the corporate media has been identified as the “Fox effect”: Fox News’ success in the ratings wars has arguably pulled other media toward its model of conservative and arguably bogus journalism. This impact was on full effect this past election as CNN dramatically increased its viewership by following Fox’s focus on Trump.ⁱⁱ Fox’s “in-your-face” style of competing, often yelling, “talking heads” has not only influenced other news outlets’ coverage but also may be increasing the incivility of American political dialogue, paving the way for less deliberative democracy and for candidates like Trump who thrive on outrageous but attention commanding rhetoric, and also diminishing the legitimacy of opposing positions.ⁱⁱⁱ Social media, as an alternative channel to the corporate mass media for communicating among the public, is seen by some as a hopeful development, but critics argue the positive effects may be largely empty dreams while the negative consequences of fragmentation of information sources and reinforcement of closed, often extreme, thinking seem to be inflicting untold harm to deliberative politics today. Trump is very much the product of what Kathleen Hall Jamieson dubbed “the echo chamber” whereby news sources, principally from the far right, not only become the single trusted source of information but also pre-emptively brand alternative fonts of views and news as biased and untrustworthy. The impenetrability of the echo chamber, for example, helps explain the immunity from criticism among his supporters seemingly enjoyed by Trump as well as the shocking efficacy of false news reports in this election, convincing many insulated citizens of otherwise transparently implausible “truths” about Hillary Clinton and the Democrats.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Obviously politics has in a sense always been a con game, and campaigns have been understood as marketing exercises aimed at “selling” candidates at least since Joe McGinniss’ inside expose of the 1968 Nixon campaign.^{liv} Today’s campaigns are staffed and directed by a host of professional managers and

consultants, public relations experts and advertising specialists, and pollsters, arguably exerting more influence than the candidates themselves. These marketing strategies can lend an air of artificiality to electoral politics and divorce the choice of leaders from the art of governing. By making candidates more dependent on campaign financing, it diminishes the influence of and accountability of parties and enhances the strength of wealthy donors and interest groups. By further fragmenting politics, it reinforces constitutional fragmentation and makes consensus and thus change even more difficult. Finally, it deepens the public's cynicism that politics is merely a self-aggrandizing game and that issues of governance are merely illusory. Ironically, despite being a professional reality TV entertainer and past master at branding, Trump benefited from the perceived amateurishness of his style. By defying the norms of how established politicians should act and professional campaigns should be run, he appealed to his populist base as somehow more authentic and trustworthy than other candidates.^{lv}

LOW PARTICIPATION

Voting is the easiest form of political participation, yet turnout in American elections is notoriously low compared to comparable democracies. While voting routinely exceeds 80 or 90% in many countries, the turnout rate in U.S. presidential elections has hovered between 55 and 60% for decades (it was about 58% in this past election) and is normally an even more abysmal 36 – 38% in off-year, non-presidential elections when most members of Congress and many state and local officials are elected. Primary voting to pick party nominees is even lower. The New York Times reported that of the 221 million eligible voters in 2016, only about 27% bother to vote in any of the party primaries. Since their votes were divided among various candidates, in the end Trump received the votes from only about 6% of eligible voters; Clinton, a less fragmented primary, received the votes of 8% of Americans eligible to vote.^{lvi} Myriad theories purport to explain the low

participation of Americans in politics. Many individualistic explanations focus on the inconvenient polling procedures, or propose attitudes that discourage voting (often these attitudinal explanations are contradictory: some claim voters are satisfied or else they would register their anger at the polls; others assert that 3M elections, reduced to choices of tweedledee and tweedledum (or tweedledumb and tweedledumber), alienate non-voters). Political institutions pose numerous barriers to participation, such as onerous registration requirements, difficult ballot access for candidates and parties, lack of competitiveness in districts (including the Electoral College), rules disenfranchising persons convicted of crimes, etc. Even systemic factors contribute to non-participation, especially growing economic inequality, especially in the face of failing working class institutions that might mobilize this vote, and lack of social capital, that is, the growing isolation of life in American communities.

After a century of extending the franchise to groups such as women, minorities, and youth, many attribute low turnout more to lack of positive attraction to voting (“pull”) than to negative exclusion (“push”). In recent years, however, especially Republican level constituencies have begun erecting new barriers to voting, requiring photo identification or proof of citizenship to register, for example, or making casting ballots more difficult, for example, by denying college students the right to vote where they study instead of in their hometowns. Although enacted in the name of protecting the integrity of elections, there is no evidence of significant corruption in the American electoral machinery. Instead, these restrictions appear to be motivated by a desire to rig the rules for partisan advantage, and unlike older research that indicated no significant difference in the political preferences between voters and non-voters, recent research has unearthed evidence that those excluded from the political process come mainly from less privileged classes and have views that are well to the left of voters. The “gaping hole” in the American electorate, then, seems to impel a significant tilt to the right in American politics. These findings match shocking new research by Martin Gilens and other political scientist that find

that majority preferences match government policies only when there is a broad consensus within public opinion, but when preferences of the affluent divulge from the majority's, the desires of affluent are determinative rather than the preferences of the majority, who have virtually no influence on policies.^{lvii}

CONCLUSION

In asking “how did we get here?”, Jonathan Kirsher offers three insightful answers: 1) “The Republicans did it”: the crack up of the awkwardly implausible Republican coalition opened a path to victory for the most inexperienced and unanchored candidate in living memory; 2) “The internet did it”: decentralized and direct media lacked the normal checks and balances that usually restrains the more emotional and extreme elements of the public; and 3) “The plutocracy did it”: exaggerated inequality and policies favoring the elite generates backlash and rebellion in the hinterland.^{lviii} I have been suggesting a different conclusion: that the surprising election of Donald Trump reveals the decadence of American democratic institutions. The pluralist democracy of elite competition characterizing American polyarchy for the generation after WWII has been hollowed out and severely weakened by neoliberal capitalism since the mid-1970s. The country retains a democratic façade of elections and civil liberties, but this “thin” model of liberal democracy is not sufficient to deal with the pressing national problems, especially in face of globalization, turn to neoliberal economic policies and patterns of development, and the growing economic inequality with resultant social stresses and problems.

SHADES OF THE SOLID SOUTH

Many people have compared Trump to Mussolini; despite his personal authoritarianism, there is no evidence so far that he has fascist leanings. A comparison with Silvio Berlusconi seems more apt, given their mutual wealth and media careers. I find Trump more reminiscent of the worst of traditional Southern politicians, evoking shades of the buffoons, demagogues, and charlatans that stalked the Southern landscape until the late twentieth century. These extremists, clowns, and con artists claimed to be champions of the “forgotten man,” but most simply provided the have-nots with a sideshow that diverted attention from the region’s pressing problems and masked policies that benefited the haves. Much has changed about the region’s institutional matrix that produced these pathological politics, but troubling continuities persist. Although the worst defects of traditional Southern politics have been remedied, countervailing trends have reshaping our national political system in ways that produced an eerie resemblance to the worst pathologies of Southern politics of a bygone era.^{lix} The South’s party system was weak; now our national parties have decayed. Southern politics was driven by white supremacy; Trumpian America is displaying shocking levels of prejudice and chauvinism. And while traditional Southern elites deliberately disenfranchised blacks and poor whites to maintain their grip on the region, the gaping hole in our national electorate allows American’s current political Establishment to rule. Rather than being the source of America’s political problems, Donald Trump is the symptom of a deeper malady. We need to fundamentally reform our political institutions and practices or else Trump could be merely the first of future pathological responses to popular frustrations. Without revamping our politics, we risk becoming what the South was during its darker days: a facade of popular rule, a veneer of formal civil liberties and elections, but lacking any genuine democracy.

Gus Cochran teaches political science at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, Georgia, and is the author of Democracy Heading South: National Politics in the Shadow of Dixie (University Press of Kansas, 2001).

ⁱ Perhaps part of the surprise reflects that the 2016 results are almost a mirror image of what occurred in 2012. The previous Republican nomination was dominated by a gaggle of candidates composed mostly of has-beens, extremists, and clowns. Supported by rich donors rather than by significant blocs of voters, they rotated almost weekly through the spotlight as frontrunners until the lone “serious” candidate in the field, Mitt Romney, emerged as the nominee late in the race, only to lose to President Obama in the general election. In contrast, the 2016 seemed to offer seventeen serious candidates, at least by comparison with the 2012 sample, with one salient exception: Donald Trump had no political experience or visible qualifications beyond his career as a business tycoon and reality TV star. Instead of the one serious nominee emerging from a field of marginal contenders as happened in 2012, the TV star, instead of following the trajectory of a shooting star and falling out of a field of serious contenders, not only won the party nomination but also the general election.

ⁱⁱ Pollsters, for example, are reexamining their sampling survey techniques. Journalists are engaged in a lively dialogue about how to report on Trump, especially his frequent contradictory and rapidly reversed policy positions and the disregard for the truth exhibited by many of his statements. The big issue in the mainstream media is whether to brand such factual fluidity as “lying.”

ⁱⁱⁱ If a reporter had repeated the question asked of a similar ideologically rather than electorally motivated minor candidate, biologist and environmentalist Barry Commoner running as a third party candidate in 1980, “Are you a serious candidate or are you just running on the issues?,” the honest answer would surely have had to have been that the intent was to raise issues and shift the range of responses permissible in American politics rather than a realistic attempt to gain the nomination of a major, mainstream political party. And certainly Sanders succeeded in this intention. As Naomi Klein proclaimed, “Forget the nomination. The left has won the debate.” *New Republic* (June 19, 2016).

^{iv} Peter Drier, “Is Bernie Sanders Too Radical for America?” *Portside Monitor* (June 30, 2015).

^v Anger at the elite may explain Trump voters’ motivation, but Trump’s billionaire appointees, who hold much more wealth than President George W. Bush’s cabinet, make it look more like his supporters have elected a Charlatan in Chief rather than a Tribune of the People.

^{vi} Hillary Clinton’s unfortunate gaff in calling half of Trump’s supporters (later reduced to some) “a basket of deplorables” can be seen as a rather graphic overstatement of this interpretation.

^{vii} Recent polls reveal that 50% of Americans say that they could not scrape together \$400 in cash to meet emergency needs, and 80% of respondents say they lived with economic insecurity in the last year, fearful of losing their jobs.

^{viii} *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010); Timothy Kuhner, “*Citizens United* as Neoliberal Jurisprudence,” 18 *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and Law* 395 (2011); Zepher Teachout, “Neoliberal Political Law,” 7 *Law and Contemporary Problems* 215 (2014).

^{ix} Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: New York: Random House, 1999); Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, “Winner Take All Politics,” *Politics and Society* 38 (2010): 152-204.

^x Margaret Thatcher, asked long after leaving office what her most impressive achievement was, replied without hesitation, “Tony Blair.” Reagan likewise might be credited as having succeeded in establishing a neoliberal framework sufficiently powerful to have dominated the politics of even his Democratic opponents.

^{xi} Phillip Converse, “The Nature of Mass Belief Systems,” *Critical Review* 18, 1-3 (Winter, 2006 (1964)).

^{xii} Lloyd Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

-
- ^{xiii} Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs, *Class War?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- ^{xiv} John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), p. 14 - 15.
- ^{xv} Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (New York: Johan Wiley, 1964).
- ^{xvi} Given that American political parties have no mechanisms to define formal membership, party identification is defined as how respondents answer the question, "Generally, speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or some other party?"
- ^{xvii} Alan Abramovitz and Steven Webster, "All Politics is National," Paper Presented at Midwest Political Science Association, Chicgo, April 16 – 19, 2015.
- ^{xviii} This was the classic definition of Joseph Schumpeter. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
- ^{xix} Jill Lepore, "Richer and Poorer," *New Yorker* (March 16, 2015).
- ^{xx} Comparative ratings of democracy can be found at www.democracybarometer.org. Former President Jimmy Carter recently stated that "America does not at the moment have a functioning democracy." Alberto Riva, *International Business Times* (July 19, 2013).
- ^{xxi} Al Smith quoted in Samuel Huntington, "The Democratic Distemper," *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975): 9 – 38. Note that Huntington argued against Smith that after the popular mobilizations of the 1960s, America was suffering from an excess of democracy. Huntington's anti-democratic prescription of fewer people participating and fewer decisions made democratically had important resonance among American elites and bears partial responsibility for the decay of democracy in recent decades.
- ^{xxii} The usual account is that the Electoral College reflected the Founders' skepticism of democracy, preferring to entrust the selection of the president to local elites rather than popular vote. This mechanism also reinforced separation of powers, creating a pathway to executive selection entirely removed from the legislative branch, unlike parliamentary government. Recent scholarship has asserted that the Electoral College was instituted as a bulwark to protect slavery, since electors were allocated not only on the basis of free citizens but included the infamous inclusion of slaves as "three-fifths persons" in determining the number of electors in slave states. There may also have been practical considerations in an era when communication and transportation were limited in a large nation: local elites could be presumed to know more about national elites than the average voter, hence could be better entrusted with making a selection among them. Local voters were thus only burdened with knowing their local leaders, who in turn could make decisions about national leadership for them. It is interesting to note how this antiquated reality has now been exactly inverted: voters today are familiar with national leaders running for president who saturate television and social media, but have no idea who they are voting for as presidential electors, who names generally do not even appear on the ballot.
- ^{xxiii} There is a good deal of confusion about partisan bias in the Electoral College. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was common to refer to a "Republican lock" on the Electoral College based on their advantage in a large number of smaller Southern and Western states. Merle and Earl Black, *The Vital South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). The dubious nature of this claim is demonstrated by Bill Clinton's two elections in 1992 and 1996. Then in the 21st century analysts began to claim that the Electoral College advantaged the Democrats, who seemed to control big states with huge blocks of electoral votes, such as New York and California. This theory seems refuted by the Electoral College victories of George W. Bush and Trump, even without voter majorities. The real partisan bias inherent in the Electoral College is toward two-partyism, based in the single-member, plurality nature of state electoral contests, at least insofar as states maintain the winner-take-all allocation of electors, a unit rule that is not constitutionally mandated but legislated by individual states. See the discussion below of how single-member, plurality election laws foster two party systems.
- ^{xxiv} The Senate allows unlimited debate on measures, thus empowering a determined minority to thwart majority rule by blocking votes from even being taken. The Senate has adopted a series of reforms to terminate debates, but a cloture vote to end debate still requires 60 votes, more than the 51 vote majority.
- ^{xxv} Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Perry Anderson, diagnosing the 2016 political crisis in Brazil, noted that the malapportionment of the Brazilian Senate between smallest to largest states is 88:1, but in the U.S. the overrepresentation is 65:1. "Crisis in Brazil," *London Review of Books* (April 8, 2016).

-
- xxvi Paul Starr, Remedy and Reaction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
- xxvii The late Robert Pastor, who headed ex-President Jimmy Carter's electoral watch efforts, noted that if the Carter Center had sent electoral observation teams to the U.S., as it did to many other countries, this country's electoral system would have been flunked. Chief among the deficiencies he noted was the lack of an independent, non-partisan electoral agency to draw district boundaries, institute electoral rules, and oversee the conduct of elections. "America Observed," American Prospect (December 20, 2004).
- xxviii Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, It's Even Worse than It Looks (revised as It's Even Worse Than It Was) (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
- xxix Matt Grossman and David Hopkins, "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats," Perspectives on Politics 13, 1 (March 2015): 119-139.
- xxx Paul Krugman, "A Tale of Two Parties," New York Times (Monday, June 20, 2016).
- xxxi Ira Katznelson notes that many New Deal programs were not actually universal, but excluded African Americans. see Affirmative Action for Whites (Gosta Esping-Andersen has argued that universal welfare policies are much less vulnerable to political attack because they include benefits for the middle classes, who are therefore much more willing to pay for them. He contrasts the success of the welfare state in Sweden with the tenuous support for safety net programs in the U.S. Or compare Social Security retirement benefits, politically untouchable, with means-tested welfare programs for the poor, roundly despised and always poorly supported.
- xxxii James Glasner, Race, Campaign Politics, and the Realignment in the South (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- xxxiii Paul Krugman, "A Party Agrift," New York Times (June 13, 2016).
- xxxiv Thomas Frank, What's The Matter With Kansas? (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004).
- xxxv David Bacon, The Right to Stay Home (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).
- xxxvi Gary Peschek, in William Grover and Peschek, Voices of Dissent (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 158.
- xxxvii Noam Schreiber, Escape Artists: How the Obama Team Fumbled the Recovery (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2011).
- xxxviii
- xxxix Thomas Frank, Listen, Liberal! (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016).
- xl Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Crisis of Labour and the Left in the United States," Socialist Register (2015).
- xli Douglas Rae, The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), explains the two party logic of single-member plurality electoral laws. Some jurisdictions in the U.S. are adopting instant runoff rules that could encourage minor parties, but the two party system enjoys widespread support, perhaps because Americans do not know any alternative system and especially among politicians enjoying their two-party duopoly.
- xlvi Thomas Piketty, Capital in the 21st Century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- xlvi Hacker and Pierson, op cit.
- xliv W. Lance Bennett, The Governing Crisis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
- xliv Robert Reich, Saving Capitalism (New York: Random House, 2015).
- xlvi Jane Mayer, Dark Money (New York: Anchor Books, 2017).
- xlvi Reich, op. cit.
- xlvi Neal Gabler, Life: The Movie (New York: Random House: 1998).
- xlvi Justin Lewis, Michael Morgan, and Sut Jhally, "Libertine or Liberal? The Real Scandal of What People Know about President Clinton" (www.umass.edu/newsoffice/archieve/1998/02/098study2.html).
- ¹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, Spiral of Cynicism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ^{li} David Brock, Ari Ralin-Havit, and Media Matters for America, The Fox Effect (New York: Random House, 2012).
- ^{lii} Diana Mutz, Effects of "In-Your-Face Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate

Opposition," American Political Science Review 101, 4 (November 2007): 621-635.

^{liii} Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, The Echo Chamber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Trump used tweets effectively both to communicate directly with his followers and to circumvent the filter of the corporate media. Ironically, because journalists began to cover Trump's tweets closely, tweeting multiplied the news coverage he received.

^{liv} Joe McGinniss, The Selling of the President 1968 (New York: Pocket Books, 1968).

^{lv} Leon Seltzer, "Outrage Meets Outrageousness," Journal of Psychohistory 44, 1 (Summer 2016): 73-84.

^{lvi} Alicia Parlapiano and Adam Pearce, "Only 9% of Americans Chose Trump and Clinton as the Nominees," New York Times (August 2, 2016): A16.

^{lvii} Martin Gilens, Affluence and Influence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

^{lviii} Jonathan Kirshner, "Trump and the End of Everything," Boston Review (June 7, 2016).

^{lix} I have argued this thesis extensively in Democracy Heading South: National Politics in the Shadow of Dixie (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).